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Interview with Sherman Saperstein by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Sherman H. Saperstein

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Sherman Saperstein

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

GMOH# 212

April 28, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is April 28, I'm in Maine and I'm interviewing Sherman Saperstein, who is in Arizona. Is that correct?

Sherman Saperstein: That is correct.

AL: And Sherman, could you start just by giving me your full name.

SS: Sherman H. Saperstein.

AL: And where and when were you born?

SS: I was born in Waterville, Maine, March 16, 1932.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

SS: My mother's name was Rose and her maiden name was Rosenthal, and my father's name was Edward. And I just wanted to say that my mother, like George's mother, came over to this country from Europe, and so she – at six years old – she was an immigrant like George Mitchell's mother.

AL: And did they know each other when you were growing up?

SS: No, I don't think so.

AL: And your father, where was he from?

SS: He was born in Port Chester, New York, but actually they moved to Trenton, New Jersey, and that's where he came to Waterville from.

AL: And what brought them to Waterville?

SS: Well, my mother lived in Waterville, and you know how, even way back then, there were what you call blind date fix-ups, and through the family in Princeton, New Jersey, my father being in Trenton, my mother used to go to Princeton to visit and they were introduced and

then the rest is history. My father came to Waterville and he started a business in 1932, which was right at the height of the Depression. It was a coal and grain business, which he turned into a lumber and building materials business. And I joined him in 1954, and the business was sold in 1997.

AL: So a long history there.

SS: Yes, a long history. We were together, actually my father and I were together for all those years.

AL: Oh, wow. And tell me about, I mean you were born during the Depression.

SS: That's right.

AL: Do you have memories from that time of what it was like to grow up during those years?

SS: No, I have to say that I really do not. Fortunately, we were a family that didn't suffer because of the Depression, and that's lucky, let's say, for me and for my family. But it was definitely the Depression, but I was too young really to remember anything about it.

AL: Now, did your mom, was she working in the home or outside of the home?

SS: Oh, she worked at home, and she was a marvelous cook, baker, she could knit, sew, and she was very talented in that department, and she was a very, very loving mother.

AL: And did you have any brothers and sisters?

SS: Yes, I have a sister whose name is Audrey, she lived in Cranston, Rhode Island, her husband was superintendent of schools for many, many years in Warwick, Rhode Island. In fact, upon his retirement I believe he was one of the oldest superintendents in the country.

AL: And can you talk about what the Waterville community was like growing up in the late '30s and the '40s and the '50s?

SS: Well, Waterville I'd have to say was a typical small New England town with a population of about I would say then fifteen thousand. It was a college town, Colby College was there. In fact, Colby is where George's father was custodian, and the college gave certain advantages, such as special concerts, plays, lectures, and football and basketball games, which Waterville was a very sports-minded town. And we were very close to Canada, so we had a large French Canadian population, as well as quite a large Syrian and Lebanese population. And I think one of the things that you wanted to know about government there, it was a mayor and councilmen type of government, and of course being a Democrat was definitely in the majority.

AL: So even back then they were fairly Democratic.

SS: Yes, I would say so.

AL: In what part of Waterville did you live?

SS: I lived in the northern part of Waterville, and there were, like many, many communities, there were good sections, medium sections and poor sections, and of course Waterville was no exception to that rule.

AL: And the area that you lived in, was it ethnic based?

SS: No, no, it was a mixed, very mixed area.

AL: And talk to me about your family traditions, you said your mom worked in the home and was very talented at many things, did she have family traditions or food traditions or anything that you grew up with?

SS: Yes. Of course in those years, families were very close. And we, being of the Jewish faith, we kept a kosher home, so food played a big part. And along those lines, buying kosher food in a small town like Waterville was difficult, so we used to import meat products and things like that from Portland, which was the center of Judaism, shall we say, in the state of Maine, there were a lot of Jews in Portland and they had kosher butchers, et cetera, and stores, so we used to go down there, or they'd send it up. It was very important to have everything kosher, so you couldn't do a lot in Waterville in that respect.

AL: Was there, religiously speaking, was there an active synagogue?

SS: Yes, actually, there was, and I would say we probably had sixty-five Jewish families. But I do want to say that Waterville, when I said had fifteen thousand population, it really had a drawing area of maybe a hundred thousand, because Waterville at that time was a good shopping center and it had a very good hospital, so health care came into the picture too.

AL: And talk to me about school and education, you went through school with George Mitchell?

SS: Yes, actually I would say that I got to know George from junior high school on. And speaking of junior high, we took a class picture, and of course I have that. And I've asked many people, I say, "Pick out George Mitchell from this picture." Nobody, but nobody could ever do it. George was the youngest one in the class, and he really didn't look at that time like he looked when he matured. But it was wonderful times that we had; in those years, group was very important. Not gangs, but groups of friends, and that made it a wonderful experience. And George was part and parcel of the group of friends that I had.

AL: Now, he was two years younger.

SS: That's right; I believe he was the youngest in the class.

AL: How did he acclimate himself in that way, being so much younger at that age?

SS: I don't think that it really came into the picture at all, I really don't. I'd have to say that I can't positively remember because it's a long time ago, but I don't think that it really made that much difference, we didn't make anything of that.

AL: Can you talk about what you did as a group of friends in those years?

SS: Well in those years, you have to realize that there was no computer and no television, and we had to make up our own good times. And we never knew anything of drugs; I would say that aspirin was as close as we came to thinking about taking a drug. And marijuana was not on the scene, so it was a lot different. And we gathered at the local drug store, Dexter's Drug Store, and the Boys and Girls Club, they had dances, and dances at school, you know, we made our own good times. And as I told you before, sports of course played a big picture, because I think in 1944 it was, that Waterville High School became the New England high school basketball champions, and that was really a great, great thing, a great boost to Waterville. And George's brother, of course, was the star of that team.

AL: Right, Johnny.

SS: Johnny, otherwise known as "Swisher." And there's a cute story that Swisher told: he said that when he was the basketball player, George was known as Swisher's brother. When George became famous, Swisher became known as George's brother. So, it makes a difference.

AL: Right. And so who were some of the other friends in your group that you went through high school with?

SS: Arthur Dexter, he was president of the class, I remember Lars Terry (*name sounds like*), Nancy Eustis, Alfred Joseph, Arlene Rosenthal, and many, many others but probably too many to list them all or to remember them all.

AL: Do you have any specific recollections of George Mitchell during those times, any stories that you recall?

SS: Well, a story not from that time but I don't want to forget to tell you, to show you what a good friend George was and is. Many years ago when President Clinton was in office and George was majority leader, they had a fund raiser in Portland at the Holiday Inn, and Linda, my wife, and I attended. And when it was over, President Clinton walked by us and George was behind him, and he saw me and he came over and he said, "Did you get a chance to shake hands with Bill?" And I said, "No, I didn't." And by that time Bill had left the room and gone out through the doors. He said, "Wait a minute." He went out through the doors, he brought Bill

Clinton back, over to me, introduced him, special, told him that I was his friend and we went to high school. And I remember Bill Clinton saying, “Well gee, if you both were at school at the same time,” he says, “how come you got much more hair than George?” But, to make a pun, I didn’t let it ‘go to my head.’ (*laughter*) But that shows you – and wherever, actually, there was a gathering, George would always acknowledge his friends in the audience. That shows you what kind of a guy he was.

AL: And besides that, have you had any contact with him over the years, and if so -

SS: Well time went by, you know how that goes, and you don’t have contact. And then when he became active as a candidate, then we certainly did. In fact, we did have a fund raiser at our home for him one time. And I just want to say that one of the big disappointments was when he ran for the governorship of the state of Maine, and I had no doubt in my mind that it would be the easiest victory he ever had. He ran against a person by the name of Longley, who was an Independent, and lo and behold Longley beat George, and that was really quite a shock at that time.

AL: Right, and that was in 1974.

SS: Well, if you say so, then that’s when it was, I don’t really remember.

AL: And so your involvement was in the fund-raising aspect of the campaign?

SS: Yes, I would say so, we were always of course a big booster of George.

AL: So you were still around and working in Maine through the ‘80s and into the ‘90s.

SS: Oh yes, I didn’t leave Maine until 2000, so I was there from 1932 till the year 2000, and then we moved, for four-and-a-half months of the year, to Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and then the rest of the time in Scottsdale, Arizona.

AL: So as we look at George Mitchell, his life and career, and your impressions of him over time, what is it that you’re left with?

SS: Well George, first off I want to mention that George had a smile that could kill, and I call him an instiller of confidence. When he opened his mouth to speak, I had no doubt that what he was going to say was going to be *the* correct thing, and it would make a lot of sense. And along those lines, I just want to mention that about a month ago out here I went to a party and Bud Selig, who is the commissioner of baseball was there, and I had a conversation with him and of course in the course of the conversation I brought up George Mitchell’s name, because you know what he did with the investigation on the steroids, and Bud Selig just could not say enough good things about George, and it was very easy for me to agree with him. And I’ll go back on, you had asked me a question, I think I got off on another subject, if you want to go back to your question, it’s fine.

AL: Well, yes, looking at George Mitchell in terms of his life and career, and what you see as some of his greatest achievements.

SS: Okay, well I go back, I think he went into prominence when he gave that impressive performance facing Oliver North at the Iran-Contra affair hearings, and then he was elected as Senate majority leader I believe in 1988, and he was there until 1995, and he led the movement to reauthorize the Clean Air Act and pass the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, I remember that. And additionally under his leadership, the Senate approved of the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] and the formation of the World Trade Organization [WTO]. And the fact that Bill Clinton wanted to appoint him to the United States Supreme Court to replace Harry Blackman, but George refused the offer because he wanted to continue helping with efforts in the Senate to pass significant, I believe, health legislation. So if someone is picked to be on the Supreme Court, I think that says a lot of what kind of a person George was and the ability that he has.

Junior year in high school, the American Legion sponsored a program at the University of Maine, it was called Boys State, and they picked X number of students, boys, to go to this, and what it was, was a mock, a political election process, and just coincidentally, George was elected senator at that time, as I remember, so that was a little bit of a hint of what was to come.

AL: Right. I hadn't heard that before.

SS: Yes, I would say that I am right. In fact, I think I even checked with one of my friends and they said that they believe that was true, that he was elected senator.

AL: Now, is there anything that I've missed that you think is important to add?

SS: Well, I could talk about George's family.

AL: Oh, you can talk some about that?

SS: Oh yeah, I knew them all well. The mother was a very nice person; as I remember this, never learned to speak English very well. And they lived in a poor section of Waterville called Front Street, and Mrs. Mitchell worked at the Wyandotte Worsted company, which was very close to their house, they made fine worsted material, and of course his father was the custodian at Colby. And I believe that even though they didn't have any education, that education was very important to them. And there was George, his brother Johnny who we've talked about, Swisher, who was a great, great basketball player, and his brother Robbie who unfortunately developed a blood disease and died, I don't know, perhaps twenty years ago. And speaking of Robbie, Robbie married Janet Fraser, who was a classmate of George and myself, of course, she was in our class. And he had a brother Paul, and a sister Barbara. And that was the family, and they were very close.

AL: And Barbara was pretty young at that time, when you were probably hanging around the house.

SS: Yes, definitely. I don't believe that I ever went to George's house, but I knew the whole story.

AL: Did you get to know his dad at all, or was he pretty busy?

SS: No, not at all, not at all.

AL: Well, when you think of George Mitchell's career, is there one thing that stands out in your mind as the thing that he's going to be remembered most for? I mean, there were so many great things.

SS: I know, and we've talked quite a lot of them. But the fact that I said that he was the instiller of confidence, and he was a great negotiator. Look at all the different things, Ireland, baseball, Israel, it can go on and on. And he's just an unusual person, with a wonderful talent for doing what he does.

AL: Thank you so much.

SS: You're very welcome.

End of Interview